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21st century learning environments

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21ST CENTURY LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

LLLP - POSITION PAPER - 2019

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“21st century learning environments”
Position paper - October 2019

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INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE SCENE

Learning can happen anytime, anywhere, and the spaces where this learning occurs are incredibly and increasingly diverse.

Education systems are undergoing a paradigm shift in the struggle to meet the needs of learners in a world that is rapidly changing from a technological, demographic, societal and environmental perspective. The rich diversity of learning environments, whether within the formal education system or beyond in the local community, workplace or civil society, is more valuable than ever to meet these rapidly evolving needs. Learning takes place across a combination of these environments, hence why we see increasing reference to the term 'lifewide' learning - where people engage simultaneously in different forms of learning at the same stage of their lives.¹

However, these diverse learning opportunities are not equally available to all sections of society and, even when available, the outcomes of learning outside formal settings are often not regarded in the same way as those produced within them. Even the outcomes of formal learning can be difficult to transfer from one system to another, if a robust strategy for the

recognition of prior learning is not in place. This clashes with the fact that **the sheer pace of change in the 21st century compels us to continue learning throughout and in many different areas of our lives** if we truly wish to understand, adapt to and, most importantly, shape the world around us. This demands that we **designate equal value to all learning environments** - whether categorised as formal, non-formal, informal or combining varying degrees of (in)formality - and reflect on how to build



cooperation and seamless transitions between them. Such a shift is a necessary step towards enacting the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights², meeting the objectives of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training³, and achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 by 2030⁴.

This shift is at the heart of the Lifelong Learning Platform's mission. Our policy paper seeks to encourage a debate and provide recommendations by illustrating the diversity of learning environments, the value of building these around the learner's needs, the need for robust validation arrangements for the learning outcomes that they produce and, finally, the importance of building cooperation between them.

It should be highlighted that the implementation of the following recommendations demands a **robust and holistic investment in education in its wider scope (lifelong learning)**, which requires both the public and private sector in light of training at the workplace, as

well as more systematic and streamlined coordination between different ministries or departments whose policies and initiatives touch on learning environments, which may include culture, employment, health, research, digitalisation and sustainable development, among others.

¹ Jackson, Norman Jeffrey (2011). Learning for a Complex World: A lifewide concept of learning, education and personal development. United States of America: Authorhouse.

² Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market. See the full list of 20 principles [here](#).

³ ET2020 Framework

⁴ Sustainable development goal 4 Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

POTENTIAL

1 Integrate a more nuanced understanding of learning environments into education, training and lifelong learning policies, guided by the overarching principle to support learners' individual and unique potential. This means recognising, including through sustained investment, the value of learning environments beyond formal academic education as dynamic hubs of competence development - from which the latter can also draw expertise in adopting more inclusive and innovative approaches to meeting learners' needs.

FLEXIBLE PATHWAYS

2 Foster flexible learning pathways by supporting people in accessing and moving across learning environments as they progress through life, in accordance with their needs and regardless of age or background. This can be achieved through measures linked to modular or 'micro-learning' approaches, shorter study cycles and enhanced arrangements for the validation of prior learning of all types, as well as **quality lifelong guidance which empowers individuals in managing their own learning and career paths and better reconciling their personal and professional lives.** All this is crucial to boost learning motivation, avoid 'dead ends' and ensure that no learners are left behind.

DIGITAL

3 Promote the purposeful use of digital and blended learning environments to offer wider and more personalised access to lifelong learning based on the **understanding that they cannot replace face-to-face learning,** in line with a holistic approach to personal development. This means making use of the diverse range of spaces that may support learning processes, including in the outdoors and local communities.

COMMUNITY

4 Upscale the concept of 'Community Lifelong Learning Centres', building on existing practices, in order to enhance integrated service delivery while catering for the **learning needs of local communities.** This is particularly relevant for marginalised or minority groups who are least likely to avail of lifelong learning opportunities.

CO-CREATION

5 Design learning environments based on a needs-centred approach, with the aim to ensure learners' role as active co-creators of knowledge and their environment. This also means flexibility in the design and arrangement of the physical space where learning occurs and allocating resources from national and EU funds, including the future InvestEU programme, to support this across the full spectrum of education and training providers.

EDUCATORS

6 Recognise the role of teachers and educators in the 21st century as facilitators, not directors, of learning with the necessary resources, training and policies to support them in managing the rapid changes that they are facing. Recognising the reality of this new role also means **integrating into our education and training policies a more contemporary understanding of who an "educator" can be,** including trainers and facilitators who work with learners outside the formal environment.

PARTICIPATION

7 Provide concrete support and resources for the integration of participatory pedagogy, including collaborative, peer-to-peer, dialogic and inquiry-based approaches, in order to ensure the active and meaningful participation of learners. More flexibility in adapting curricula and assessment methods is a vital step towards achieving this.

COMPETENCES

8 Recognise that competences for the 21st century are not only digital or technical in nature but encompass learning to learn as a competence in its own right and other "life skills" which support individuals' resilience and participation in wider society. The development of such competences should be supported from the beginning of and across the lifelong learning continuum, including through investment in non-formal and informal learning environments which are particularly relevant in terms of acquiring these competences.

VALIDATION

9 Prioritise the implementation of arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning which is imperative to give value and visibility to all learning irrespective of the environment where it takes place, especially for learners with a low level of or an adverse experience with formal education. These arrangements should be universally accessible, inspired by the key guiding principle of social equity as well as the meaningful participation of stakeholders from all sectors affected by validation processes.

COOPERATION

10 Systematically build cooperation and partnerships between and across formal, non-formal and informal learning environments, at regional, national and European level, including support for their representative associations at these different scales, in order to facilitate innovation transfer and foster coherent lifelong learning approaches that take into account and bring together the different aspects of individuals' lives.

WHAT IS A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT?

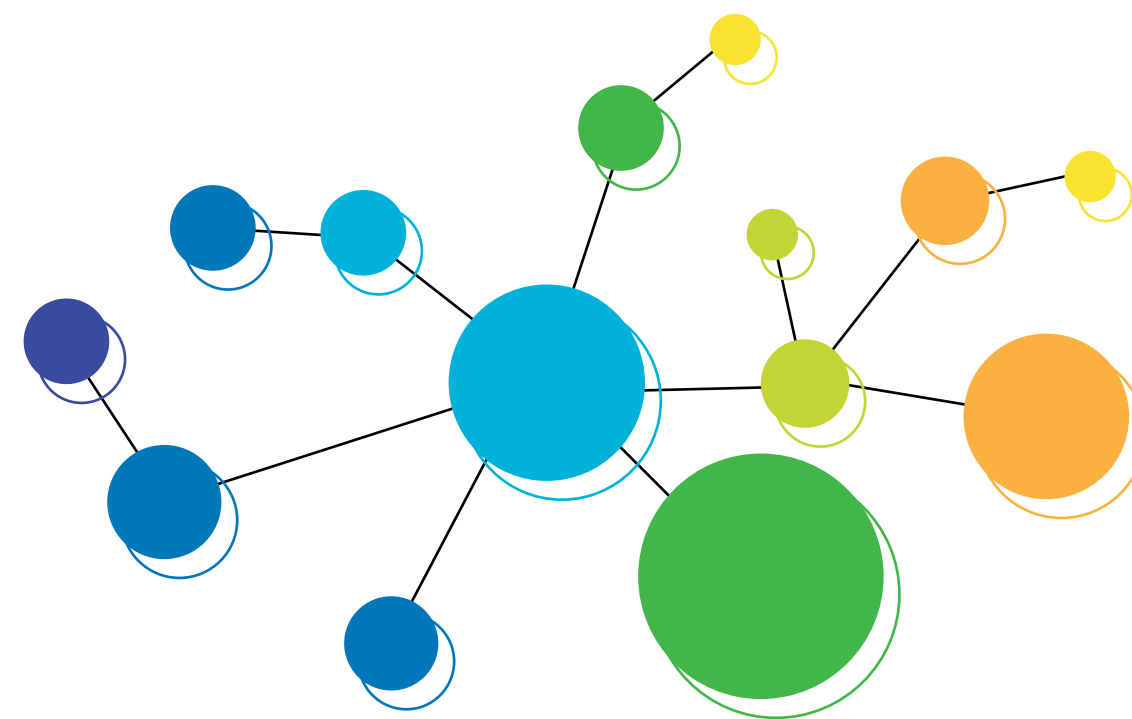
Before dwelling on the learning aspect, it is useful to reflect on what we understand an environment to be. More than just the space around us in any given location, **an environment may be considered a multi-modal hybrid phenomena that involves social, cognitive, cultural and biological interacting modalities, as well as “relational” phenomena**, i.e. there is no environment unless there are agents who interact and enact its affordances⁵. This is important to consider in a learning context because **the learner, as an agent, is confronted with other phenomena (including other agents) and much of the learning occurs through those interactions**. This evokes different notions that are discussed throughout the paper from the micro-level, such as elements related to learners' agency and the shaping and co-creation of their learning environments, to the macro- or system level, namely the policies that shape the everyday reality of learning environments and where they fit in the socio-political order.

The term “learning environment” specifically may be defined or conceptualised in different ways. The Glossary of Educational Reform describes it as follows:

‘Learning environment refers to the diverse physical locations, contexts, and cultures in which students learn. Since students may learn in a wide variety of settings, such as outside-of-school locations and outdoor environments, the term is often used as a more accurate or preferred alternative to classroom, which has more limited and traditional connotations—a room with rows of desks and a chalkboard, for example⁶.

The term also encompasses the culture of a school or class—its presiding ethos and characteristics, including how individuals interact with and treat one another—as well as the ways in which teachers may organize an educational setting to facilitate learning.....’

Variety in settings and contexts is fundamental because not one type of environment can have a monopoly on learning, even if the formal education system and the policies that shape it may tend to give the opposite impression. In essence, **learning is a personal process which forms part of the human experience and, as such, it does not depend on formal education provisions⁷**. The above definition also reinforces the notion of learners relating



to and interacting with each other, as well as evoking the idea of how the physical space itself is arranged. These are elements analysed below when we consider how to build the learning environment around the individual with a view to maximising her or his learning potential.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) also looks at such concepts and principles in its 2017 study on Innovative Learning Environments (ILEs). Here **a learning environment is described as one which “includes the activity and outcomes of learning, rather than being just a location where learning takes place”⁸**. This calls for reflection on how learners participate in the “activity” and on what they do with the “outcomes” after their experience in any given learning

environment. This is crucial when it comes to the question of what support exists at the system level for the recognition and validation of learning outcomes.

⁵ Markauskaite, L., & Goodyear, P. (2017). *Epistemic fluency and professional education: Innovation, knowledgeable action and working knowledge*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.

⁶ Ed Glossary, «learning environment»

⁷ Billett, S. (2010) *The perils of confusing lifelong learning with lifelong education*. *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 29 (4) 401-413.

⁸ OECD (2017) *Innovative Learning Environments*, p.16.

SHIFTING FROM EDUCATION TO LEARNING: ALL LEARNING MADE EQUAL

Across most academic and policy contexts, learning tends to be categorised as 'formal', 'non-formal' or 'informal'. Formal education or learning is learning that is organised and structured as part of a clearly defined curriculum and leads to formally recognised qualifications from institutions such as schools and universities. Due to its official character or 'concreteness', this is usually the category most privileged by policymakers and wider society. Non-formal learning tends to be understood as voluntary learning which happens outside this formal system but remains intentional and structured to a certain extent within a programme delivered by an organisation (e.g. work-based training). Informal learning, on the other hand, is usually understood as 'experiential' in the sense that it is not institutionalised, planned or structured and typically occurs through an individual's everyday activities and interactions (e.g. learning among family and friends).

Of course, this is a rudimentary overview and the above categorisations are subject to contested debate. Crucially, **there is a school of thought which questions the utility of labelling learning in this way and considers it more accurate**

to speak about the degree of formality or informality in learning, because these are characteristics present in all situations where learning occurs⁹. Indeed, **the boundaries between what are perceived as formal, non-formal and informal learning environments are rarely clear-cut. There are cases where non-formal education methods are used in the school classroom, a distinctly formal environment**¹⁰. Another case is at universities where multiple environments may sit closely side-by-side for students who, besides attending a formal course, live in halls of residence which form a "vibrant and diverse all-round living and learning environment" where the learning process "extends beyond the classroom to involve a wide range of experiences: from moving away from home for the first time; to sharing a living space; to participating in the wide range of (...) activities and programmes on offer as part of university life"¹¹. **This transition between learning environments not only happens horizontally across different contexts ('lifewide') but also vertically through time ('lifelong')** when we consider, for example, non-traditional students such as experienced workers who enroll in a formal degree programme after developing

skills at the workplace. This shows that learning environments of different types are not mutually exclusive but people move between them in an infinite variety of ways.

In many respects, **an understanding of this broad nature of learning environments is absent from education and training policies across the EU**, or where they acknowledge this they tend to do so only superficially or inconsistently. At the EU level, for instance, although the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning Framework¹² provides a strong basis, inconsistencies arise when other initiatives such as those related to the European Education Area do not address learning beyond the formal sector, or in the case of the 2018 Education and Training Monitor which looked at the acquisition of civic competences through non-formal and informal learning exclusively in terms of youth work, thus neglecting its much broader scope.

All in all, **formal (academic) education still remains the main driver of the learning ecosystem**, while vocational education and training, non-formal and informal learning remain, to varying degrees, secondary in

esteem or recognition. **Although formal education still holds an essential role in our societies, and its quality and inclusiveness should be guaranteed**, a shift is needed towards a lifelong learning paradigm where supporting the individual's potential is the key guiding principle. This means equal recognition and value for all learning environments and the possibility to move seamlessly between them.

⁹ Colley, H., Hodkinson, P. & Malcolm, J. (2003). Informality and formality in learning: a report for the Learning and Skills Research Centre.

¹⁰ CARMA project

¹¹ European University College Association (EuCA) (2012). *Soft skills in action: Halls of residence as centres for life and learning*.

¹² Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning.

21ST CENTURY, SO WHAT? SPACE, TIME, AND SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION

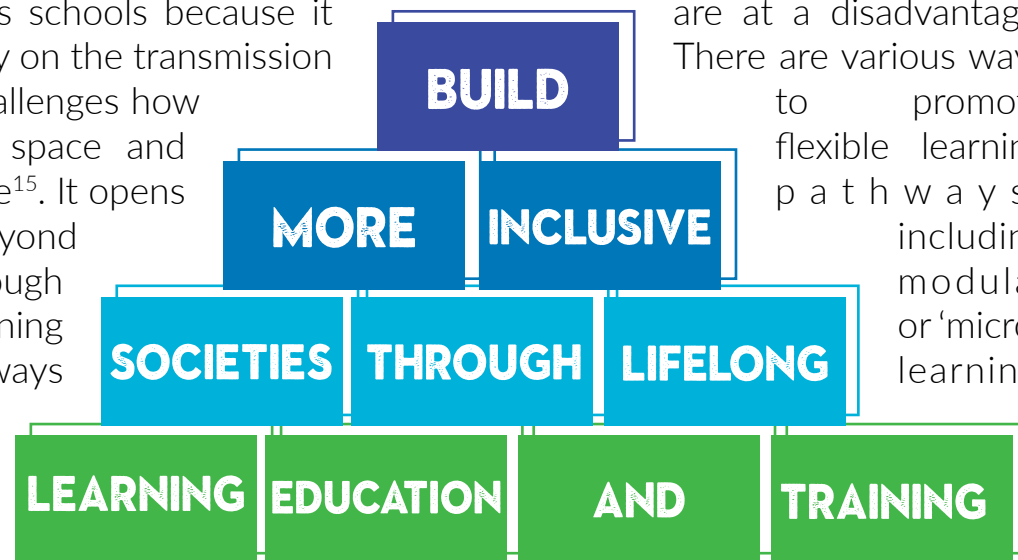
The rapidly growing use of digital technologies has given rise to **new digital and blended learning environments**, opening possibilities for wider access to knowledge and more personalised learning processes¹³. A wealth of new opportunities for learning are available thanks to MOOCs, online tutoring and video platforms such as Youtube where one can find tutorials about almost everything. In fact, a 2018 research study in the United States found that **51% of Youtube users say that the website is very important for them to learn how to do new things**¹⁴. Not only has digital technology expanded opportunities for non-formal and informal learning in this way, it has implications for formal environments such as schools because it breaks their monopoly on the transmission of knowledge and challenges how they organise time, space and their internal structure¹⁵. It opens them to the world beyond their walls. So, although different types of learning environments will always

have their own needs and particularities, the digital wave has further loosened the boundaries between them.

This loosening of boundaries equally has a temporal dimension as learners are less and less likely to fit into the linear pattern of school-work-retirement. It is no longer the norm and **more needs to be done to support individuals in accessing and moving across learning environments as they progress through life, in accordance with their needs and regardless of age, ableness or socio-economic background**. Otherwise, learners with a low level of formal qualifications or low-skilled workers

in pursuit of retraining are at a disadvantage.

There are various ways to promote flexible learning pathways, including modular or 'micro-learning'



approaches, shorter study cycles, enhanced arrangements for the validation of prior learning of all types (more on this below) and indeed the purposeful use of digital tools. This flexibility is key to boost learning motivation and widen access to lifelong learning, so that it can fit easily into people's busy lives. When it comes to adult learning in particular it is difficult to imagine, without such flexibility, how an ambitious target of 25% for participation in adult learning, proposed by the European Commission under the vision for a European Education Area¹⁶, could be achieved while the current rate stands at a modest 11.1%¹⁷.

It is a common claim that the future of learning is digital, that this is the defining feature of

21st century learning environments where space and time are rendered flexible thanks to innovative technologies, including artificial intelligence. Despite the many advantages that their carefully planned use can bring such as saving time, selection of the most relevant content, etc., they cannot replace face-to-face learning. **A holistic approach to human development that caters for individuals' well-being and makes use of the full range of learning environments available to us, not only online but also offline, is crucial.** Outdoor learning is a concrete example. There is a substantial body of evidence documenting the positive effect that learning in natural environments can have on children's health, well-being, competence development and

EUROPEAN DISTANCE E-LEARNING NETWORK (EDEN)

The **Support Future Learning Excellence through Micro-Credentialing in Higher Education (MicroHE)** project aims to gather the state of the art in micro-credentialing in European higher education, forecasting the impacts of continued modularisation of higher education, examining the adequacy of European recognition instruments for micro-credentials, and developing an online clearing house to facilitate recognition, transfer and portability of micro-credentials in Europe.

BEST PRACTICE

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY CONTINUING EDUCATION NETWORK (EUCEN)

Through Digital Wellbeing Educators, eucen aims to increase the capacity of lecturers and teachers to integrate digital education in a way that promotes the digital wellbeing of students. Through building teacher capacity, the project seeks to improve students' abilities to manage their online time, make the most of digital learning, critically assess the media they consume and create and become responsible, confident digital citizens.

BEST PRACTICE

environmental attitudes in adulthood¹⁸. In a lifelong learning perspective this aspect of learning in outdoor environments, either informally or integrated into formal or non-formal education programmes, is important to consider in the face of **climate change and other ecological crises** as a way to foster connection with the natural world. Therefore, learning in the 21st century should not only be about adapting to digitalisation, or seeking to digitalise all learning environments, but about addressing the full array of societal challenges we are confronted with and using all possible learning spaces to help us

find solutions.

¹³ LLLPlatform (2017), Reimagining Education for the Digital Age, Position Paper, P.6

¹⁴ Pew Research Center (2018) «Many Turn to YouTube for Children's Content»

¹⁵ Plataforma para o Crescimento Sustentável (PCS) (2019) «Reshaping Schools for a T-World»

¹⁶ European Commission (2017). Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture: The European Commission's contribution to the Leaders' meeting in Gothenberg, 17 November 2017. COM/2017/0673 final.

¹⁷ European Commission (2019). Education and Training Monitor 2019. SWD(2019)350

¹⁸ Malone, K. and Waite, S. (2016) Student Outcomes and Natural Schooling. Plymouth: Plymouth University.

ALL DIGITAL

Digital Competence Development System (DCDS) aims to establish a framework that provides the low-skilled adult European population with the basic digital and transversal competences for employment, personal development, social inclusion and active citizenship. The project developed an open, innovative multilingual Digital Competences Development System (DCDS) to provide non-formal training to low-skilled adults. Face-to-face training is indispensable for low-skilled adults and that technology can have a supportive role but it cannot replace in person learning.

BEST PRACTICE

LOCAL COMMUNITIES: A SHARED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

If the natural world can be a learning environment, so too can our local communities which act as vibrant hubs of everyday activities and interactions. Formal education institutions such as schools and universities have a general tendency to be closed off from the communities in which they are located, serving only their enrolled students and lying empty during evenings and weekends. Instead, **we should connect learning environments with their communities and open them up to other users in the local area**. This could be through Community Service Learning initiatives (see project below) or by establishing **“Community Lifelong Learning Centres”** that can cater to the needs of those people not in education, training or employment or the general public interested in further personal and professional development¹⁹. Many inspiring practices based on this concept already exist across the EU, as

showcased at the joint Cedefop-LLL policy forum “What role for community lifelong learning centres? The potential of one-stop shops for preventing youth at risk from disconnecting” which took place in Brussels on 29 May 2019²⁰. It has also been the basis for national programmes, like in Latvia where the initiative “Schools as Community Development Centres” was implemented as a way to sustain small schools in rural areas while using them to host extracurricular and adult education activities²¹.

The main advantage of Community Lifelong Learning Centres is that they **provide a welcoming environment, often combining different modalities of learning and offering other personal and social services alongside these, which is accessible to the local community** both in terms of physical proximity and as places where learners,

ERASMUS STUDENT NETWORK (ESN)

SocialErasmus is an international project by the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) that promotes a social attitude among young citizens participating in mobility programmes, to facilitate their integration into the local community while gives them the chance to make a long lasting social change in society through volunteering activities. The project goes under the slogan: Leave your mark!

BEST PRACTICE

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY FOUNDATION (EUF)

University of Gent has developed the academic programme **Community Service Learning (CSL)**, a form of experiential learning where students contribute to their community by participating in professor-approved community service placements related to course learning objectives and then produce corresponding reflective assignments.

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including those from marginalised groups, feel a sense of safety and belonging. This community-centred approach is a crucial element in the vision for 21st century learning environments because it serves to open up lifelong learning opportunities at the local level, particularly for those individuals least likely to participate in formal education programmes.

¹⁹ LLLPlatform (2019) LLLP Briefing Paper Implementing a holistic approach to lifelong learning: Community Lifelong Learning Centres as a gateway to multidisciplinary support teams.

²⁰ Cedefop (2019), *Conclusions of the Policy Forum*.

²¹ Tūna, A. (2015). *Development of the School as Multifunctional Resource Community in Latvia: Opportunities and Challenges; Society, Integration, Education*. Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference. 1. 496.

EUROPEAN SCHOOL HEADS ASSOCIATION (ESHA)

‘Open Schools for Open Societies’ aims to help a thousand European primary and secondary schools with opening up to their communities. An “open school” is a more engaging environment for students and raises their motivation by connecting student projects with real needs from the community and drawing upon local expertise. The project includes the production of guidelines on designing partnerships with local industries, research organisations, parent associations and policy makers.

BEST PRACTICE

BUILD THE ENVIRONMENT AROUND THE LEARNER

According to the OECD, the first principle of an innovative learning environment is that it “recognises the learners as its **core participants**, encourages their active engagement and develops in them an understanding of their own activity as learners” (emphasis added)²². It follows that **learners should be at the centre of all considerations when it comes to designing and supporting learning environments**, whether at the micro- or macro-level. Attention must be paid to ensuring their role as active co-creators of knowledge and their environment, avoiding the outdated idea of learners as passive listeners who fit into rigid, pre-defined models and spaces. This means that the environment should foster **learners’ “agency”**, understood broadly as the sense that they are doing or are able to do things, rather than things just happening to them: in other words, a sense of efficacy²³.

Crucially, to develop agency the learner “needs to be treated as an active subject, not just an object of upbringing or education”²⁴. This means looking at the learner’s intrinsic potential and enabling him or her to discover and harness this



potential, no matter his or her past or background. This is especially relevant for individuals with adverse prior experience of the formal education system which, in many cases, may have eroded their sense of efficacy by failing to adequately respond to their needs. On the other hand, **learning environments beyond the formal sphere tend to be more needs-sensitive**, as a general rule. For instance, in the context of children from a migrant background, non-formal educators can better adjust to the needs of individual learners because they are not restricted by national curricula and timetables, claims one study²⁵. In general, non-formal education can positively

SOLIDAR FOUNDATION

The **Collaborative Learning Action Network (CLAN)** project was launched to enable low-skilled adults to identify transversal skills acquired throughout their lives and not validated in their lives, using information and communication technologies. The project presents a new methodological approach with individual’s interests and motivations as the main target upon which the whole process will take place.

BEST PRACTICE

influence a learner's confidence by enhancing self-esteem, self-awareness and motivation to learn²⁶. Likewise, **informal learning can help to create a more personally meaningful learning experience which is built around individual needs, goals and expectations**²⁷. Of course, this does not mean all learning environments beyond the formal system are inherently good (and the latter inherently bad) or offer a panacea for meeting learners' needs, but it highlights the imperative to recognise and take seriously the potential added value they bring to the learner's experience, either in their own right or by incorporating some of their approaches into the formal domain.

Promoting the learner's agency may also be achieved through the physical design of her or his environment. For example, **it is increasingly accepted that the traditional way of organising the school classroom with the teacher at the front and students seated in rows for a whole lesson is not optimum for supporting innovative pedagogical approaches**²⁸. Building the environment around the learners' needs thus calls for more flexible infrastructure. The benefits of this are proven, for example, by the 'Clever Classrooms' initiative in the UK which showed that differences in the physical characteristics of classrooms, including air quality, colour and light, can boost the learning progress of primary school pupils by as much as 16% in a single year²⁹. Evidently, supporting such flexible learning environments requires targeted resources. However, these resources cannot be directed only towards general schools as other spaces equally stand to benefit from more flexible and innovative infrastructure, including

vocational colleges, adult education centres, community and volunteer-based associations, all of which usually struggle to access this kind of investment. Support for spatial and infrastructural flexibility in all types of learning environment is key to guarantee the diversity of learner-centred, lifelong learning provision. We also see this as a potential area of intervention for the 'Social investment and skills' window of the future InvestEU programme.

²² OECD (2017) *Innovative Learning Environments*, p.22.

²³ Kumpulainen, K. et al. (2010) *Learning Bridges: Toward Participatory Learning Environments*, CICERO Learning, University of Helsinki, p.23-25

²⁴ Ibid., p.27.

²⁵ Bislimi, F. et. al. (2017) *Education and Skills Development in the Context of Forced Migration*, Policy Brief developed by the T20 Task Force on Forced Migration

²⁶ Burlacu, A. (2012) "The importance of non-formal education and the role of NGOs in its promotion", Article for the 7th edition of the International Conference 'European Integration Realities and Perspectives' - Academic Excellence Workshop.

²⁷ Petkovic, S. (2018). *Desk study on the value of informal education, with special attention to its contribution to citizenship education, civic participation and intercultural dialogue and learning*, European citizenship, peace-building and conflict transformation. Commissioned by the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership.

²⁸ European Schoolnet (2017) *Guidelines on Exploring and Adapting Learning Spaces in Schools*.

²⁹ Barret, P. et al. (2015) *Clever Classrooms: Summary Report of the HEAD Project (Holistic Evidence and Design)*. University of Salford, Manchester.

MEDITERRANEAN UNIVERSITIES UNION (UNIMED)

The **Upskilling Refugees and Adult Educators (UPGRADE)** project aims to develop innovative training resources for refugee and migrant adults with low skills, as well as educators working with these populations, in order to support their integration in the EU labour market.

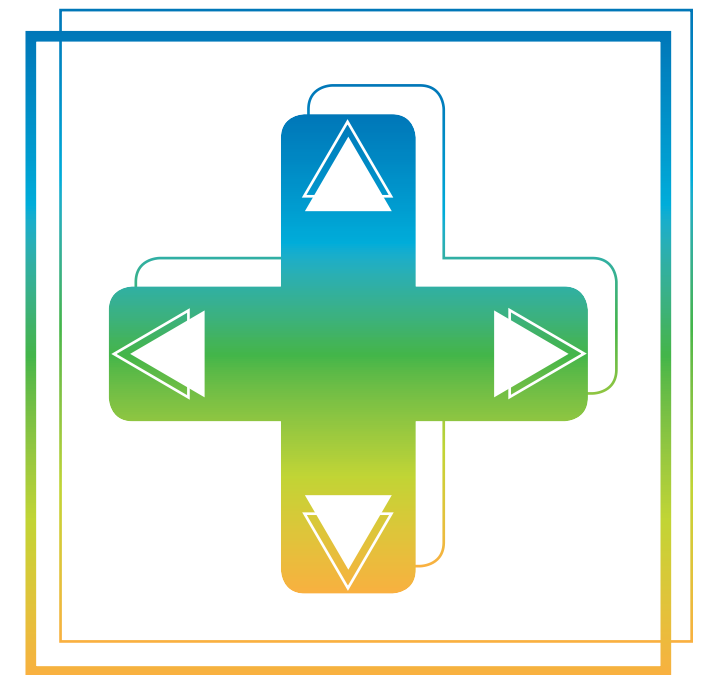
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WHO CONTROLS THE ENVIRONMENT?

In the 21st century, **the role of teachers and educators is obliged to rapidly evolve**, in large part due to the technological changes mentioned above which mean they are no longer the definitive source of knowledge which they were in the past. They are becoming "gatekeepers of the learning process rather than the content"³⁰. Moreover, in a flexible environment where learners become active agents it follows that the teacher's position within that environment, including during interactions with the learners, must be reimaged. To support agency, like the arrangement of the physical space, teachers may adapt how they are positioned vis-à-vis the learners, for example, by sitting among them, allowing one of them be the chair of the lesson and putting up their hands like the others, changing rules about who has the right to move around in class or write on the blackboard or whiteboard, etc..³¹ **They should adapt their pedagogical approach with the aim to facilitate learning rather than direct it**. Again this relates to how they set up and navigate the space of the learning environment as teachers "use space to underscore their learning intentions and personal belief sets"³².

At the macro-level, a broader understanding

of how we define a teacher or educator should be reflected in education and training policies. **Non-formal educators, community or volunteer facilitators, trainers, youth workers, parents, among several others, are equally gatekeepers of the learning process and must be recognised as education stakeholders** and for the valuable work that they do in sustaining the diverse range of learning



environments in society for people of all ages. In addition, in the 21st century it makes sense to bring the 'real world' more into formal learning environments by adopting

the practice of inviting 'guest teachers' into the classroom or lecture theatre, for example, experts from civil society, the business sector including SMEs and start-ups, political representatives or even the students' family members. This shows that, **informally, we all have the potential to be an educator.**

Such approaches should not be construed as an attempt to undermine the role of teachers or professional educators. They will always play a crucial guiding role and have the right to high-quality working conditions, initial training and continuous professional development in order to adjust the environments that they facilitate to the demands of the modern world and meet learners' individual needs.

Optimising the potential of learners across all environments, and building these around their needs, simply calls for a more flexible, open-minded approach in how we conceive the student-teacher relationship and who we regard as supportive agents in the learning process.

³⁰ Plataforma para o Crescimento Sustentável (PCS) (2019) *Reshaping Schools for a T-World*, p.26

³¹ Kumpulainen, K. et al. (2010) *Learning Bridges: Toward Participatory Learning Environments*, CICERO Learning, University of Helsinki, p.51.

³² Lucas, B., Claxton, G. and Spencer, E. (2013). *Expansive Education: Teaching Learners for the Real World*, p.15.

EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR HISTORY EDUCATORS (EUROCLIO)

The **Learning to Disagree** project aims to support educators in how to constructively discuss controversial topics by developing teaching materials and guidelines and enabling students to acquire social and civic competences through debates and dialogue on such issues.

BEST PRACTICE

21ST CENTURY TEACHING AND LEARNING METHODS

Learning environments are shaped according to the approaches and practices that take place within them. As the above principle outlined by the OECD highlights, innovative learning environments foster the "active engagement" of learners, otherwise they can hardly be expected to participate in a meaningful way. They work with a mix of pedagogical approaches, many of which are based on collaborative work and inquiry-based learning³³. **Interactions within the environment need to foster learner agency and initiative rather than the acquisition of ready-made contents**, which means raising expectations of active participation and taking learners seriously as interlocutors who contribute to meaning creation. Thus, the possibility of creating knowledge on their own and having a say in the choice of contents through dialogic inquiry can enhance learners' engagement³⁴. Here **mutual interaction is also an important element to consider**, recalling the value of peer-to-peer learning as an approach in developing learners' agency.

There are good practices of such

participatory pedagogy across formal, non-formal and informal learning environments and its value has long been championed by researchers and civil society, yet the extent to which it has been integrated at the macro-level as a central tenet of education and training policies, with the necessary support and training for educators, is questionable. The training question is also important when it comes to the use of digital tools which have the potential to support innovative pedagogies. However, **there is often a lack of sufficient support from policymakers or, where it does exist, it is rarely guided by a long-term strategy.**

In addition, the further integration of these participatory methods would benefit from giving more autonomy to formal education environments to design and apply the curriculum and explore new assessment methods, not only summative but formative or combined³⁵, where the acquisition of knowledge is not only evaluated but competences in a wider perspective. **The grading system remains the predominant assessment method** and,

GIVING LEARNERS A TOOLKIT FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY COLLEGE ASSOCIATION (EUCA)

The **Learning and Interacting to Foster Employability (eLene4Life)** project supports curriculum innovation in higher education through the development of active learning approaches for soft skills, with the aim to improve students' employability. Teachers will receive support in pedagogical innovation and the transformation of teaching practices, with the ultimate goal of improving the learning experience of students.

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besides reinforcing competition among learners from an early age, it is increasingly criticised for the fact that it privileges the agency of (young) learners who are born with a certain cultural capital against those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, hence contributing to early school leaving, inequality of opportunities and limited social mobility³⁶. Some countries in Northern Europe are moving away from the grading system but elsewhere in Europe, there is little questioning of grading systems and their impact on learners, including attitudes towards learning in general. We thus consider flexibility in this area as a prerequisite for supporting the shift towards

21st century learning environments.

³³ Schleicher, A. (2015), *Schools for 21st-Century Learners: Strong Leaders, Confident Teachers, Innovative Approaches*, International Summit on the Teaching Profession, OECD Publishing, Paris, p. 68.

³⁴ Kumpulainen, K. et al. (2010) *Learning Bridges: Toward Participatory Learning Environments*, CICERO Learning, University of Helsinki, p.50-51.

³⁵ Innoval "Innovative assessment for validation" project, 2016-2018, Erasmus

³⁶ Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J. (1990) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (Theory, Culture and Society Series) (in French: *La Reproduction. Éléments pour une théorie du système d'enseignement*, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1970)

As outlined above, a learning environment should foster learners' understanding of their own activity as learners. This evokes the notion of **"self-regulated learning"**, i.e. the conscious planning, monitoring, evaluation and control of one's learning in order to maximise it³⁷. It also relates to how we approach learning as a competence in its own right. **In order to ensure individuals' resilience and ability to adapt to social, economic and other forms of change, they must learn how to learn** - this is a prerequisite for acquiring all other competences, and sets the foundation for lifelong learning. It is the ultimate survival tool for living in the 21st century. Therefore, from early childhood onwards,

learning environments should aim to support individuals in identifying, exploring and developing the optimum ways in which they themselves engage in the learning process, in a spirit of self-discovery and avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach.

Learning to learn is not the only competence that learners need in their toolkit for 21st century life. Indeed, "21st century" competences, including creativity, problem-solving, leadership, empathy and communication, to name just a few, are increasingly in demand in the context of rapidly changing societies and labour markets³⁸. For instance, a report by the McKinsey Global Institute predicts that

EUROPEAN FORUM OF TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (EFVET)

The **Innovative Curriculum on Soft Skills for Adult Learners (ICARO)** is a project aimed at developing a training curriculum on soft skills for unemployed adult learners to support their (re)integration in the labour market. The project has also developed an assessment tool for soft skills.

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demand among employers for “social and emotional skills” such as negotiation, leadership and initiative-taking, will rise by 22% by 2030. What they term “higher cognitive skills” will also be highly sought after, with creativity expected to rise in demand by 30%³⁹. Indeed, as the labour market is changing so rapidly, and many young learners are likely to end up working in professions that do not exist yet, it is more sustainable to invest in competences that will help them navigate and adapt to shifting contexts instead of only those related to technical, occupation-specific fields. Beyond employment matters, 21st century competences support learners’

engagement with the wider world, including participation in civic life at the local, national and global level, if we consider competences such as the ability to critically engage with different perspectives or understand and respect social and cultural diversity. This further reveals the broader societal purpose of learning environments next to meeting individuals’ learning needs.

Reflecting on how learning environments promote the development of this full range of competences again requires looking at how is this supported by their diversity. Non-formal and informal learning environments, in light of their flexibility, tendency towards

EUROPEAN EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGES - YOUTH FOR UNDERSTANDING (EEE-YFU) AND ORGANISING BUREAU OF EUROPEAN SCHOOL STUDENT UNIONS (OBESSU)

The project Coloured Glasses Grow: Expanding Intercultural Education (CGrow) was developed to expand the ‘Coloured Glasses’ methodology which is based on helping young people acquire intercultural and global citizenship competences through a series of workshops where they examine their attitudes towards their own cultures as well as other cultures and engage with issues related to intercultural communication, stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination.

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learner-centredness and proximity to ‘real life’, can benefit people of all ages in this respect. For instance, **there are studies highlighting the valuable role of non-formal education in the positive socialisation of children, including such competences as communication, self-sufficiency and self-confidence**⁴⁰. Extracurricular activities have demonstrated the ability to help students develop skills such as problem-solving, teamwork and resilience⁴¹. **Non-formal adult education is also key in supporting older learners to acquire the full range of “life skills”**, covering those competences mentioned above as well as basic numeracy and literacy skills, health and financial literacy, etc⁴². Investing in environments beyond the formal sector can therefore bring added value to lifelong competence development, providing people with the necessary toolkit to navigate the

uncertainties and complexities of 21st century life.

³⁷ Faculty Focus, Teaching and Learning

³⁸ World Economic Forum (2018) Future of Jobs Report 2018.

³⁹ McKinsey Global Institute (2018) Skills Shift: Automatic and the Future of the Workforce, Discussion Paper

⁴⁰ Skirmantienė, J. (2012). ‘Neformaliojo ugdymo svarba pozityviajai socializacijai (The importance of non-formal education for positive socialisation)’, *Socialinė teorija, empirija, politika ir praktika* 2013 Nr. 7, Vilnius. Cited in SIRIUS (2018) Role of non-formal education in migrant children inclusion: links with schools, p. 18.

⁴¹ Durlak, Joseph A., Roger P. Weissberg and Molly Pachan, “A Meta-Analysis of After-School Programs That Seek to Promote Personal and Social Skills in Children and Adolescents”, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 45, March 2010, pp. 294-309.

⁴² Javrh, P., Mozina, E. and Volcjak, D. (2017) Report on Life Skills Approach in Europe. The Life Skills for Europe project.

EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS (EAEA)

The Life Skills for Europe project seeks to improve basic skills provision in Europe by explaining, further developing and upscaling a “life skills” approach. It has developed an overarching life skills learning framework and modules that are transferable across Europe, with a particular focus on people from a disadvantaged background, refugees and people resistant to intercultural exchange.

BEST PRACTICE

ALL LEARNING MADE EQUAL ALL LEARNING MADE VISIBLE

The knowledge and competences that individuals acquire in non-formal and informal learning environments are not always accorded sufficient value or visibility. This is problematic because it deprives people of the opportunity to understand and communicate their learning or use their competences to participate in further learning or the labour market, besides perpetuating a view of formal learning environments as the sole provider of knowledge and competences. Indeed, **the fact that learning environments are so diverse means that we need robust systems in place for the validation**⁴³ of competences obtained in such varied contexts in order to give all learning the visibility and value deserved. **This becomes particularly true in the digital age where most competences are acquired outside of the compulsory education**, and it is true for a lot of other areas on which information has been made much more readily available through communication and information technology. In addition, learners spend much of their time in family, community and outdoor activities, often cultural, sport or volunteering, during which they acquire a number of “soft skills”. So far validation arrangement systems only partially exist. In the EU, the 2012

Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning brought a new impetus to the issue⁴⁴, yet most Member States lack a strategic vision and have lagged behind in their efforts to implement the Recommendation.

The Recommendation allows progress towards a common and shared understanding of validation between EU Member States and between stakeholders. It states that the validation process is composed of four steps: identification, documentation, assessment and certification. If the Council Recommendation specifically targets non-formal and informal learning, it is because validation in formal education is already institutionalised whereas making competences visible in other learning environments remains a key challenge in EU

countries. Nevertheless, the recognition of prior learning at higher education level remains yet another challenge for most institutions across the EU.

Most EU countries are still in the process of developing their national qualification frameworks, whereas some already have put in place validation systems to recognise learning from non-formal or informal learning environments, such as volunteering and work-based learning, for instance⁴⁵. In the validation of prior learning, some universities give credit for people to access higher education without necessarily having walked the traditional pathway. **Putting in place systems of validation helps make the transition in the labour market more fluid and flexible, and therefore reinforces economic growth and competitiveness.**

Currently validation of non-formal and informal learning in most EU countries is mostly used by individuals to acquire a **formal qualification** and the process of obtaining it follows the formal education system approach under the form of summative assessments, the “exams”, which assess one’s acquired knowledge (mostly) and competences at the end of the learning process (only)⁴⁶. It does so by assessing the development of learning outcomes against (quality) standards defined in the formal education system.

Validation has to be adapted to the characteristics and needs of different target groups and learning situations, especially when it comes to non-traditional learners, such as NEETs, migrants, refugees, individuals with low skills and qualifications, disabilities or from poor socio-economic backgrounds⁴⁷. In order to ensure the

EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS (EAEA)

The **Transnational Peer Review for Quality Assurance in Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning** is a project aimed at increasing the transparency, market relevance, consistency and transferability of VNFIL across Europe. It supports both Member State VNFIL systems by providing a common framework and tools, as well as transnational use of VNFIL by increasing mutual trust at the European level.

BEST PRACTICE

EUROPEAN VOCATIONAL TRAINING ASSOCIATION (EVTA)

Italian member ENAIP has a project on **Validating Integration Competences of Refugees (VIC)** aimed at analysing existing integration measures for refugees and then provide educators working with refugees with the tools to promote, plan, actively develop and validate “integration skills” within the target group.

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usability of validation tools for all learners in different environments, a broad repertoire of innovative methods or approaches, such as formative and practice-based assessment, digital storytelling, video- or game- based assessments, or any methods that involve supporting individuals during the process, hence mitigating learner’s anxiety, must be developed, shared and transferred across learning environments. Anxiety, resulting from the feeling of incoming failure, leads to adverse experience with education, and negatively impacts individuals’ learning to learn competence and their positive attitude towards learning throughout life⁴⁸. **Validation of non-formal and informal learning also brings individuals many benefits in terms of self-confidence and encourages lifelong learning.** After all, it is shown that giving individuals with a low level of education the willingness to learn again after an adverse school experience, is much more efficient to get them into learning than individuals with a higher level of education⁴⁹.

Furthermore, **validation of the learning**

taking place outside the formal education system is essential to allow individuals navigate “flexible pathways” and access upskilling, both are policies fostered by the EU institutions. Although innovative validation methods are crucial to support lifelong learning in a rapidly changing world, knowledge, understanding and recognition of these are often lacking among formal learning environments. **There is a strong need for cross-sector cooperation,** between employers, trade unions, public employment services, guidance services, civil society and local authorities in order to build a validation ecosystem that valorises all learning environments at an equal level and meets the criteria of all stakeholders. At the same time, it is essential to maintain social equity as a guiding principle for all validation policies and practices, as an unchecked privatisation of the process could deprive learners with fewer resources of the opportunity to validate their competences. It is important in this regard that employers contribute too.

In terms of European cooperation, the

varying definitions and perceptions of validation between Member States hinders the development of policies based on common understanding of key quality principles such as validity, reliability, transparency, trust-worthiness or cost-efficiency. This limits the transferability of innovative methods, a situation further complicated by the fact that good practices emerging from validation projects, many funded by the Erasmus+ programme and a few from the European Social Fund, fail to inspire policy reform due to limited dissemination capacity. This under-exploitation leads to a continuous cycle of small-scale projects working on similar topics. Besides enhanced budget within such projects for dissemination purposes, a possible remedy would be an EU community of validation practitioners which could not only exchange practices on how to give visibility to learning outcomes from non-formal and informal environments, but also synthesise and find links between

the outputs of specific projects and serve as a reference point for policymakers.

⁴³ Validation is understood as a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard. There are four steps to this process: identification, documentation, assessment and accreditation.

⁴⁴ [Council recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#)

⁴⁵ [VINCE project case studies Commentary Report:](#)

⁴⁶ Generally, to ensure the validity and reliability of assessment methods and to avoid additional costs, educational institutions tend to prefer traditional tests like the ones used in formal education. This rigidity hinders the demand of validation from learners. Assessment methods can potentially serve any target groups by presenting different formats and adapting to any skill level giving a more personalised and satisfactory experience to the learner.

⁴⁷ [Innoval “Innovative assessment for validation” project, 2016-2018, Erasmus](#)

⁴⁸ [Needs assessment reports. Innoval “Innovative assessment for validation” project, 2016-2018, Erasmus.](#)

⁴⁹ Cedefop (2016). [Improving career prospects for the low-educated: the role of guidance and lifelong learning.](#) Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop research paper; No 54.

INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF CENTERS FOR TRAINING IN ACTIVE EDUCATION METHODS (FICEMEA)

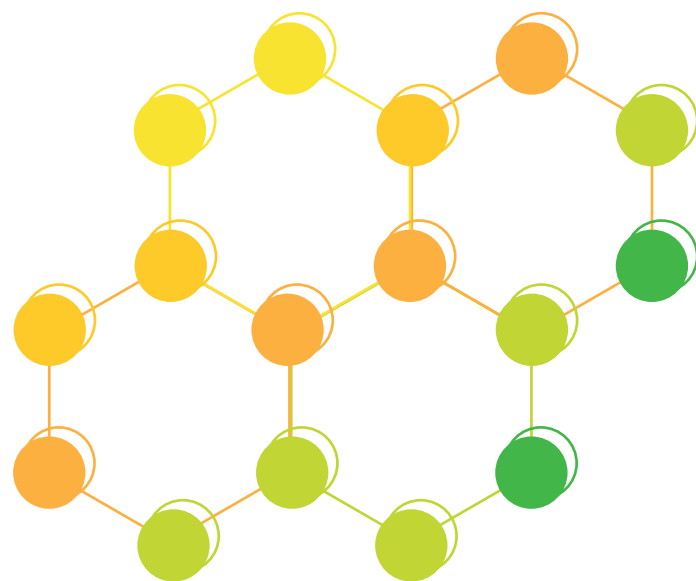
Belgian member Ceméa has a project on **Volunteering Youth: routes and tools for Competence’s Emersion (VOYCE)** aiming to identify practical tools to validate the learning of volunteers, enhance the use of such tools among the organisations that deal with young volunteers, and make sure the learning acquired is easily accessible by companies and usable on the labour market.

BEST PRACTICE

CONNECTING THE DOTS: COOPERATION IS KEY FOR SUSTAINABLE LIFELONG LEARNING

The Council Recommendation for the EU Key Competences Framework calls on Member States to support the acquisition of these competences through, among other actions, “reinforcing collaboration between education, training and learning settings at all levels, and in different fields, to improve the continuity of learner competence development and the development of innovative learning approaches”⁵⁰. The rationale for this is clear, as learning should connect with all of the learner’s life world and ‘funds of knowledge’ which, evidently, surpass the boundaries of the formal environment⁵¹. If the latter fails to connect learning across contexts, there is a risk that it becomes isolated from the rest of the world and separates knowledge from its “actual context of use”⁵². This is a daunting scenario because it leaves learners ill-prepared for the growing complexities and challenges of the 21st century world. In addition, non-formal and informal learning environments, for example, in the form of after-school activities for young learners, can serve as a bridge or “border zone” between the culture of the school and peers, families and communities⁵³. Hence, fostering cooperation between all these different spaces is crucial.

The importance of cooperation not only applies to learning environments of different modalities (formal/non-formal/informal) but also those of the same type. In fact, this is reflected in the basic legislation



of the EU as Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU highlights the need for cooperation between educational establishments. This can support active involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of policy reforms in the Member States as well as the exchange of good teaching and learning practices, both within and across different sectors. More networking between learning environments is required considering, for

example, that schools, vocational colleges and civil society organisations in remote or disadvantaged regions often find themselves isolated from their peers.

All in all, **an alternative perception of learning environments needs to be embedded in the design of education policies** as non-formal and informal learning spaces are still often regarded as purely recreational rather than dynamic and strategic hubs of competence development - from which formal environments can also draw expertise in adopting more inclusive and innovative approaches. The EU and the Member States should encourage and support more partnerships between the

formal, non-formal and informal sectors. This interconnectedness should be seen as a defining feature of 21st century learning environments.

But how to achieve those partnerships? One possibility is **more activities organised at European and national level where policymakers and practitioners learn about good practices in building bridges between different learning environments**. For instance, in recent years LLLP, as a pan-European umbrella network of civil society organisations, has collaborated with the European Commission in organising peer learning activities⁵⁴ which have showcased the added value of cooperation with civil

LEARNING FOR WELL-BEING FOUNDATION (L4WB-F)

The **Act2Gether** initiative is a global movement to create partnerships between generations, across all sectors, such as Health, Education, Governance, Art, Sports, Religion, Welfare and Justice. Setting the example of a holistic approach by including the transformative power of children. Act2Gether consists of:

- GetherLand: Gatherings for all ages to play with the serious challenges in our world today
- GetherLearn: Training that helps children and adults to be better partners
- GetherLink: Online Platform for a global community sharing stories of partnership

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society for education, both policymaking and practice, bringing new and much appreciated insights for Member State representatives. The future generation of the EU's Education and Training 2020 framework could further facilitate such exchanges and encourage the Member States to mainstream them into their policies on education, training and lifelong learning. This is echoed by the European Parliament in its explicit call to the Commission to **“build closer cooperation and dialogue with representatives of civil society, recognising that their experience on the ground is essential to achieving the ET2020 goals”**⁵⁵.

At the national level, the tradition of cooperation between formal, non-formal and informal learning environments varies greatly from one Member State to another and often lacks structure or strategic vision. A possible remedy which LLLP has explored and conducted preliminary research on is the establishment of “national lifelong learning platforms”, in other words, cross-sectoral alliances of stakeholders in the field of education, training and skills to support the implementation of national lifelong learning strategies⁵⁶. This resonates with the work carried out by the OECD on developing national initiatives

LIFELONG LEARNING PLATFORM (LLLp)

The **LLL-HUB** project aimed to create a feeling of shared responsibility on EU lifelong learning strategies through a multilateral network and ownership among relevant stakeholders (Europe 2020 headline targets, ET2020, European Semester Country-Specific Recommendations...). This was achieved by fostering national and transnational public spaces for debates and mutual policy learning, involving the grassroots level in a genuine reflection with decision-makers on the design and implementation of coherent and comprehensive lifelong learning strategies.

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to elaborate skills strategies by involving a wide range of stakeholders, policy-makers, experts, civil society, etc⁵⁷. Depending on the national context, there could also be such platforms at the regional level. Overall, they would serve as a useful **focal point for policymakers when conducting consultations, gathering expertise in how to adapt policies and resources to the diversity of learning environments** while also, and just as importantly, supporting deeper cooperation and knowledge transfer among them. A pilot scheme could be funded through the European Social Fund or its successor programme.

A further area of cooperation which would bring significant innovation to learning environments concerns **coordination at the policy level between different national ministries and Directorate-Generals of the European Commission**. Education, training and lifelong learning are not only directly beneficial in themselves for individuals' well-being and personal development but are crucial enablers for social inclusion, culture, health, employment, research, innovation, digital transformation and sustainable development. This transversal value of learning merits a more integrated policy approach where experts and policymakers from different departments regularly communicate with and learn from each other⁵⁸. Such a systems approach is even adopted and recommended by international institutions⁵⁹. They clearly see value in its potential to strengthen education systems through evidence-based policy-making. To support its implementation this integrated policy approach should go hand in hand with a greater flexible allocation

of resources to lifelong learning in all its diversity across funding programmes at the national and European level, including in the EU budget for 2021-2027⁶⁰.

⁵⁰ Council recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning

⁵¹ Kumpulainen, K. et al. (2010) *Learning Bridges: Toward Participatory Learning Environments*, CICERO Learning, University of Helsinki.

⁵² Ibid., p.14.

⁵³ Miller, Beth M., *Critical Hours: Afterschool Programs and Educational Success*, Nellie Mae Education Foundation, May 2003.

⁵⁴ September 2017 EQF Advisory Group PLA on the role of non-governmental stakeholders in implementing the 2012 Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (Lisbon); January 2018 EQF Advisory Group PLA on Validating and valuing transversal skills and competences acquired by adults through volunteering and other non-formal learning opportunities (Brussels); April 2019 ET2020 Thematic Working Group on Promoting Common Values and Inclusive Education PLA on cooperation between education institutions and civil society (Zagreb).

⁵⁵ European Parliament 2016 report on the follow-up of the Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET2020).

⁵⁶ Lifelong Learning Platform (2018) *Feasibility Study for National Lifelong Learning Platforms*.

⁵⁷ OECD, *National Skills Strategies*

⁵⁸ OECD (2016) *Governing Education in a Complex World*.

⁵⁹ The World Bank developed the Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER), an initiative to produce comparative data and knowledge on education policies and institutions, with the aim of helping countries systematically strengthen their education systems and the ultimate goal of promoting Learning for All.

⁶⁰ Lifelong Learning Platform, MFF Reaction.

LIFELONG LEARNING PLATFORM

EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY FOR EDUCATION

The Lifelong Learning Platform is an umbrella that gathers 42 European organisations active in the field of education, training and youth. Currently these networks represent more than 50 000 educational institutions and associations covering all sectors of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Their members reach out to several millions of beneficiaries.

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